Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

How much can UK support for US tanker seizure restore transatlantic ties?

The U.S. seizure of a Venezuela-linked oil tanker in the North Atlantic was seen by some as the unilateral action of an America-first government with scant regard for other countries' views. Britain calls it an example of trans-Atlantic cooperation in support of international rules.

The U.K. government argues that the interception of the vessel by American special forces backed by British sea and air support, alongside a U.S. pledge of security guarantees for Ukraine, vindicate Prime Minister Keir Starmer's efforts to keep Trump from abandoning America's European allies.

Others say that is wishful thinking, as the U.S. capture of President Nicolás Maduro and Trump's renewed desire to acquire Greenland put Starmer's bridge-building efforts under potentially intolerable strain.

Europe's dilemma

"The U.K. is trying hard to find positive things to say about all this," Bronwen Maddox, director of international affairs think-tank Chatham House, said Thursday. "The tanker gives governments like Keir Starmer's a way to support the U.S. without supporting everything it's doing.

"You can see the dilemma: The U.K. and Europe don't want to provoke Trump and the administration, which might put at risk first the defense of Ukraine and second the defense of Europe and third their trade deals," Maddox said. "But they're torn, because they also want to stand up for principles."

Debriefing British lawmakers on the ship seizure, Defense Secretary John Healey insisted that the U.K. and the U.S. remain "the closest possible defense and security allies."

> NATO is stronger now, larger now and more united now than ever before - John Healey

NATO, he added, "is stronger now, larger now and more united now" than ever before.

U.S. officials said the seizure of the merchant vessel Bella 1 – and a second tanker intercepted in the Caribbean – are part of its operations to take control of Venezuela's oil following Maduro's ouster.

Healey had a different emphasis, framing the interception of the ship as it headed toward Russia as action to support Ukraine and tackle the "shadow fleet" of decrepit tankers used by Russia and Iran to evade international oil sanctions.

"Last year, it was estimated that Russia sold up to $100 billion from sanctioned oil, money which is directly funding attacks against Ukrainian citizens," Healey said. "We owe it to Ukrainians to step up on these shadow operations, and we are."

Starmer stresses the positive

Since Trump's return to office a year ago, European nations including the U.K. have struggled with how to deal with a president who has slapped tariffs on trading partners, quit international organizations and derided NATO, the bedrock of Euro-Atlantic security for more than 75 years.

France's President Emmanuel Macron on Thursday lamented that the United States is "gradually turning away from some of its allies and freeing itself from the international rules."

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Starmer continues to emphasize the positive. The center-left prime minister has made it a key goal to keep on Trump's good side, and to keep Trump onside with Europe over Ukraine.

He has refrained from direct criticism, despite

strong political pressure to condemn Trump's attacks on London Mayor Sadiq Khan, criticism of British immigration policy and $10 billion lawsuit against the BBC.

He has declined to criticize the toppling of Maduro, stressing that the U.K. supports international law without saying whether the U.S. attack broke it.

Pragmatic politics

British officials pointed to the Trump administration's commitment at a conference in Paris this week to provide security guarantees for Ukraine after a future ceasefire as a concrete result of its approach. Healey said those guarantees "could not be more important."

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"It's very tactical on the part of the U.K.," she said. "Grab the United States where you can to demonstrate that you're on the same page, that you are useful. "That's pragmatic politics. That's realism."

But not all differences can be papered over. Trump's insistence that acquiring Greenland, a semiautonomous Danish territory, is essential for U.S. security has forced the British leader into a position at odds with the president.

Starmer has said repeatedly this week that "only Greenland and the Kingdom of Denmark" can decide the future of the vast Arctic island.

Starmer spoke to Trump late Wednesday and "set out his position on Greenland," the prime minister's office said in a terse summary of the call. It did not say how Trump responded.

Maddox said that Trump's proposal "to seize the sovereign territory of a European country, a NATO member" is so egregious that Starmer's "dance of keeping under the radar begins to look not just ridiculous but self-defeating."